

ELECTRIC LAMINATOR

This application claims the priority of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 60/518,048, filed on November 7, 2003, which is incorporated herein in its entirety, by reference.

BACKGROUND

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to the lamination of documents for preservation and protection. It finds particular application in conjunction with a laminator which is compact and readily packaged, and will be described with particular reference thereto. However, it is to be appreciated that the present invention is also amenable to other like applications.

DISCUSSION OF THE ART

[0002] Documents are often laminated between sheets of clear plastic for purposes of protection and preservation as well as for aesthetic purposes. Laminating machines are available in a variety of sizes for laminating large documents, such as poster size sheets, and smaller documents, such as photographs, membership cards, business cards, and the like. In larger machines, the item to be laminated is typically passed between pairs of rollers. Upper and lower layers of laminating film are drawn from supply rolls and applied to the item with heat and pressure. These devices are generally referred to as roll laminators. For smaller sized items, a pouch laminator is often utilized. The pouch consists of a folded over sheet of plastic, such as vinyl or polyester. The item is inserted into the fold and the assembly inserted into the laminator. The sides of the pouch are subjected to heat and pressure inside the laminator to form a seal around the item. In some devices, the folds are coated with an adhesive resin to assist in bonding the sides of the pouch together.

[0003] The laminator may generate considerable amounts of heat. Accordingly, a platen is sometimes affixed to the base to avoid damage to underlying surfaces and to provide a surface from which the item to be laminated can travel smoothly out of the laminator. The platen, however, makes the laminator difficult to package, ship, or store in a relatively small container. Additionally, laminators are not readily portable, particularly when hot.

[0004] The present invention provides a new and improved laminator and method of use which overcome the above-referenced problems, and others.

SUMMARY

[0005] In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a laminator is provided. The laminator includes a housing and means for applying at least one of heat and pressure to a lamination film whereby the lamination film is applied to an item to be laminated. Trays are pivotally connected to the housing. The trays are movable between an operative position and a raised position, in which the trays extend upwardly, adjacent opposed sides of the housing.

[0006] In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a laminator is provided. The laminator includes a housing. Rollers are located within the housing for applying at least one of heat and pressure to a laminating film to apply the film to an item to be laminated. Inlet and outlet trays are mounted to the housing and are movable between a horizontal operative position and a storage position. At least one of the trays defines a handle by which the laminator can be transported when the trays are in the storage position.

[0007] In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for laminating is provided. The method includes lowering inlet and outlet trays of a laminator into an operational position adjacent a housing of the laminator. An item to be laminated is positioned on the inlet tray and fed into the laminator housing. The laminated item is received on the outlet tray. The trays are raised to a storage position, in which handles of the trays are located above the laminator housing for grasping by a user.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] FIGURE 1 is a perspective view of a laminator according to the present invention;

[0009] FIGURE 2 is a second perspective view of the laminator of FIGURE 1, showing a cord wrap;

[0010] FIGURE 3 is a perspective view of the laminator of FIGURE 1, ready for use;

[0011] FIGURE 4 is a side sectional view of the laminator of FIGURE 1; and

[0012] FIGURE 5 is a cross sectional view showing the rollers and motor of the laminator of FIGURE 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0013] With reference to FIGURES 1 to 3, a laminator **10** suited to home, school, or office use is shown. The laminator includes a housing **12** formed from upper and lower housing members **14, 16**. Trays **18, 20** are pivotally mounted to opposed front and rear sides **22, 24** of the housing. The housing **12** and trays **18, 20** may be formed from a rigid plastic, metal, or the like.

[0014] The laminator **10** can be used for coating both sides of an item **22**, such as a sheet of letter sized paper or a small-sized photograph or identification card, with a transparent film **24** formed from polyester, vinyl, or other suitable material. In the illustrated embodiment, the film **24** is in the form of a pouch, which is fed into the laminator along with the item **22** to be laminated. The pouch comprises a folded over sheet of the film, which may be coated, on its inner surfaces, with a heat and/or pressure sensitive resin. The resin forms a seal around the item when subjected to pressure and/or heat within the laminator, as will be described in greater detail below.

[0015] The front and rear folding trays **18, 20** are pivotally connected to the front and rear sides **26, 28** of the laminator housing, respectively. When not in use, a compact structure is achieved by folding the trays upward from a lower, operative position (illustrated in FIGURE 3), to an upper, raised or storage position (illustrated by the rear tray **20** in FIGURE 1). When both trays are in the operative position (FIGURE 3), they extend generally horizontally from the housing and can be collinear. Slots **30, 32** are formed in the front and rear trays **18, 20**, respectively, adjacent distal ends **34, 36** of the trays, to provide bar-shaped handles **38, 40**. When both trays **18, 20** are in the upper position, they are angled inward from vertical, i.e., sloping toward each other at their distal ends **34, 36**. In the illustrated embodiment, the front and rear sides **22, 24** of the housing slope inwardly, toward an upper end of the housing. The housing is thus generally triangular in cross section. In one embodiment, angled recesses **42, 44** are defined in the front and rear housing sides **22, 24**, which are shaped to receive the trays at least partially therein. When the trays are in the raised position, the trays are seated in the respective angled recesses **42, 44** of the upper housing member. The handles **38,**

40 are then sufficiently close that they can be grasped by a user with one hand, allowing the laminator to be readily transported by the handles **38, 40**. Optionally, protrusions **46** extend from a rear surface of the handles to limit vibration of the trays when packaged for shipment. As is apparent, in the raised (storage) position, the trays **18, 20** extend above the housing such that the handles are located above the top of the housing.

[0016] Optionally, one of the trays **20** is configured for receiving a power cord **50**. Specifically, as shown in FIGURE 2, the rear tray **20** has a cord wrap **52**, which extends exteriorly of the tray when the tray is in the raised position.

[0017] Several ventilation slots **54** are formed in the upper housing member **14**. As shown in FIGURE 1, the slots **54** are located on top of the housing, so that they are not obstructed by the trays **18, 20** if the trays are raised while the laminator is cooling. An on/off switch **56** is also disposed on top of the housing. As shown in FIGURE 1, the power switch **56** is surrounded by a lens **58** which acts as a diffuser for diffusing light from a “ready” light, as described in greater detail below. The diffuser allows the light to be seen from a variety of angles and distances so that a user may be able to determine that the laminator is ready for use from across a room.

[0018] With reference now to FIGURE 4, which shows an exemplary cross section of an interior **60** of the laminator **10**, the laminator includes means for transporting the item to be laminated and means for applying heat and/or pressure for laminating the film **24** to the item **22**. In one embodiment, the transporting and applying means can comprise one or more sets of rollers. In the illustrated embodiment, upper and lower horizontally extending parallel rollers **62, 64** convey the pouch and item **22** through the interior **60** and serve both heating and compressing functions. However, it is also contemplated that two (or more) pairs of rollers may alternatively be provided, one pair for heating the laminating film, another pair for applying pressure. Additional rollers may be provided to assist in transporting the item through the housing

[0019] The rollers **62, 64** each include a resilient cylindrical contacting member **68, 70**, formed from natural or synthetic rubber, or other suitable material. The contacting members **68, 70** are positioned to create a nip **72** therebetween. Metal shafts **74, 76** extend through the centers of the contacting members and are supported at either end by vertically extending end plates **78, 80**, as illustrated in

FIGURE 5. The upper or driven roller **62** is rotated by a drive motor **82**. As shown in FIGURE 5, the drive motor includes a drive shaft **84**, which is connected to one end of a drive nut **86**. The shaft **74** of the driven roller **62** is received by an opposite end of the drive nut **86** and thus rotates when the drive shaft **84** is rotated. The rotation of the upper roller **62** is transferred to the lower roller **64** across the nip **72**. The shafts **74**, **76** are free to rotate within circular passages **88**, **90**, **92**, **94** through the respective end plates **78**, **80**. A metal bar **96** is clamped between the end plates **78**, **80** to maintain a fixed spacing therebetween.

[0020] With reference also to FIGURE 4, the rollers **62**, **64** are surrounded by upper and lower heat deflecting members **100**, **102**, which are supported on the end plates **78**, **80**. The members **100**, **102** may be formed from aluminum, or other suitable material. Flanges **104**, **106**, **108**, **110** extend from opposite ends of the members **100**, **102** to define closely spaced inlet and outlet passages **112**, **114**. The passages **112**, **114** are wide enough for the passage of the laminating film and item therethrough. The members **100**, **102** each define an interior groove **116**, **118**, which is shaped to receive a resistance heating element **120**, **122** therein for heating the respective roller **62**, **64**. A thermocouple **124** or other temperature sensor is mounted on an exterior surface of one or both of the members **100**, **102** and is configured to signal a ready light **126** to switch on when the member **100** reaches a predetermined temperature suitable for laminating. The light is visible through the diffuser **58** mounted to the upper housing member **14**, directly above the ready light **126**. A control unit **128** receives a signal from the power switch **56** and directs power to the resistance heaters **120**, **122**. The control unit **128** shuts off or reduces power to the heaters **120**, **122** if the thermocouple **124** indicates that the members **100**, **102** are at or above a maximum safe temperature for laminating. The control unit **128** also controls the operation of the drive motor **82**.

[0021] The item **22** to be laminated is placed on the tray **18** with the fold of the pouch facing the laminator (FIG. 1). The tray **18** is indented with arrows **130** or otherwise marked to indicate to the user the direction of travel of the item. The housing defines an inlet slot or throat **132** which is aligned with the tray for receiving the item **22** and pouch **24**. The inlet tray **18** may have a suitable shaped recess **134**, best shown in FIGURE 3, which ensures that the pouch is centered between ends of the inlet slot **132**. The tray **18** thus helps to guide the item **22** and pouch **24** into the laminator **10** and allows the user to let go of the item as soon as it has been

engaged by the rollers **62, 64**. The item and pouch follow the path indicated by arrows **A** in FIGURE 4, passing through the passages **112, 114** and the nip **72**. The laminated item leaves the interior **60** via an outlet slot or throat **136**, defined between the upper and lower housing members on a rear of the device. The item slides from the slot **136** on to the outlet tray **20**, positioned to receive the laminated item. The item can be allowed to cool on the outlet tray **20**. As shown in FIGURE 4, the inlet slot **132** and outlet slot **136** are defined by a gap between the upper and lower housing members **14, 16**, although it will also be appreciated that one or both of the slots may be defined solely by one or other of the upper and lower housing members **14, 16**.

[0022] The inlet and outlet trays **18, 20** are pivotally mounted to the upper and/or lower housing member **14, 16** by pivot members **140**, such as cylindrical pivot pins (FIGURE 4), which allow the trays to be pivoted, as shown in phantom in FIGURE 4. In the illustrated embodiment, the pivot members **140** (preferably two pivot members, one on each side of the tray) are mounted to the upper housing member **18** via suitably positioned openings (not shown) in the upper housing member, one on either side of the respective slot **132, 136**. In the illustrated embodiment, the pivot pin openings are defined in side walls **141** of the recesses **42, 44**. As will be appreciated, the pivot pins may alternatively extend from the housing with openings for their receipt defined by the trays. It is also contemplated that pivot members may alternatively be mounted to the lower housing member or that hinges or other types of pivoting members be used. The lower housing member **16** defines outwardly extending shelves **142, 144**, adjacent the respective slots **132, 136**, which retain the tray in the horizontal, lower position.

[0023] When the laminator is not in use, the trays **18, 20** are folded up to give a compact configuration to the laminator **10**. Preferably, in the storage position, the trays fit within the perimeter of the lower housing portion **16**. The laminator can be shipped and stored with the trays in the folded up orientation. In order to use the laminator for laminating a sheet **22**, the trays are opened to their horizontal positions prior to operating the power switch **56**. When the switch **56** is operated, the drive motor starts to rotate the rollers and the heating elements are heated. When the ready light **126** comes on, the user can begin a laminating operation. Optionally, the switch **56** may have an intermediate position, in addition to heating and off positions.

In the intermediate position, the rollers **62, 64** rotate but the heating elements **120, 122** are not heated, thus providing for a cold pressure lamination.

[0024] In another embodiment (not shown), the trays **18, 20** are detachable from the housing for storage.

[0025] The exemplary embodiment has been described with reference to the preferred embodiments. Obviously, modifications and alterations will occur to others upon reading and understanding the preceding detailed description. It is intended that the exemplary embodiment be construed as including all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.